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THE ADMIRAL'S BRIEF GUIDE TO AMERICAN SPYING

Bobby Inman likes to put things in perspective, and offers a standard 20-minute review of the history of American intelligence-gathering that goes something like this:

For the first 100 years of its existence, the United States created intelligence organizations during wartime and abolished them when the wars were over. The first permanent peacetime intelligence unit was created in 1882, when the Secretary of the Navy chartered what became the Office of Naval Intelligence, and a naval officer went to England . . . to count British ships!

The Defense Department, not to be outdone, sent men to Berlin, Vienna and Petersburg, and the race was on. World War I gave impetus to the notion of gathering of technical intelligence, and by the time we entered World War II we had what Inman calls an austere intelligence gathering capability.

That ability soon became lush, with the OSS, clandestine human collection and covert action. "After the war, the leadership sat down to talk about what to do. They decided that we should never again be so dumb about the outside world." They already had Navy, Army and State Department intelligence; the CIA was to run the clandestine operations but, in a break with the British system, also had a major analytical division.

The Korean war demonstrated a need for better information flow among departments, so the director of Central Intelligence was given a leadership role, "to produce a flow to the CIA, and a reverse flow."

President Truman, wanting a separate agency for technical intelligence, chartered the secret National Security Agency in 1952. Tasking came from the director of Central Intelligence, but it was administered by the Defense Department. Collectors in the field were military; the internal staff was civilian. NSA's main purpose was to function in wartime, but things being what they are in Washington, it was soon functioning full time.

The CIA built its encyclopedic intelligence base and launched its covert activities. But in 1959 none of the intelligence agencies could agree, for instance, on how many missiles the Soviets had. Eventually, President Kennedy discovered there was indeed a missile gap—we had more than the Russians.

Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, deciding that he wanted control of analysis, commissioned the Defense Intelligence Agency. Overt operations went to the State Department, covert stayed with the CIA.

The war in Vietnam took a lot of people away from activities elsewhere in the world; then, because of the balance of payments problem, American presence abroad was reduced. That, says Inman, was "the single most damaging decision to the country's human intelligence system."

The country's technical capability was increased, with the use of satellites, but manpower on the technical side declined. Simply put, there were not enough people to sort through the material collected. One result: the Yom Kippur war in 1973 went unpredicted. Revelations of CIA misconduct and acrimonious congressional hearings damaged the reputation of intelligence gatherers of all sorts, abroad and at home.

"By 1980, there were four prospective foreign agents in America for every agent here to cover them," Inman says. The ideal ratio is two FBI agents for every suspected spy. "The total intelligence community had been reduced 40 percent since the plateau was reached in the early '60s."

The Reagan administration has reversed the trend, Inman says. □

—James Conaway